

INQUIRY
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A sand trap for the CIA

ROPES OF SAND, America's Failure in the Middle East, by Wilbur Crane Eveland. W.W. Norton, 382 pp., \$14.95.

VICTOR MARCHETTI

EVERY NOW AND THEN A book comes along that is singularly informative, meaningful, and timely. *Ropes of Sand*, the story of the U.S. government's overt and the CIA's covert interventions in the Middle East since World War II, is such a book. The author indicts the myopic and ultimately self-defeating policies for dealing with Arab nationalism (as well as the Arab-Israeli problem) that have helped to botch our relations with the entire oil-rich area—possibly beyond any chance of lasting repair.

Wilbur Crane Eveland, who was at one time a top-level CIA undercover agent, is highly qualified to have written this fascinating, revealing, and honest book. Not only is he an expert on Middle Eastern affairs and a man with a strong sense of historical perspective, but in his clandestine days, largely during the 1950s, he usually operated under the direct orders of Allen Welsh Dulles, then the head of the CIA—and occasionally those of his brother John Foster Dulles, secretary of state at the time. In carrying out his secret missions, the author often dealt personally with the highest political leaders in the Arab world. He also engaged in all the dirty tricks of the intelligence "community"—from spying to manipulating and bribing local politicians to fixing elections and supporting coups d'état; most of them came to naught in the end and some backfired badly.

Yes, Eveland admits, he is partly to blame for creating the mess in the Middle East. He maintains, however, that others are even more guilty, namely fanatical ideologues like the Dulles brothers,

and the CIA professionals whose bureaucratic ambitions superseded all sense of logic and justice. There were other culprits, too—Presidents, Congress, and special interest groups like the Zionists and, in a different sense, the big oil companies. But now, as he reflects on the undercover games he played, he sees the folly of it all, and wants to share both his misgivings and his thoughtful insights with the American public.

The CIA, of course, attempted to block the publication of this very embarrassing memoir. And with good reason. *Ropes of Sand* is a devastating firsthand account of how the CIA really works. With numerous examples the author illustrates his thesis that the primary purpose of this clandestine agency is not at all the collecting of intelligence for the benefit of the policy makers and planners, but rather, the manipulating of the internal and sometimes the foreign affairs of other nations.

He also shows how this interference works only to create suspicion, distrust, and often violent reactions to the goals the U.S. government officially espouses, undermining belief in the American system and our own political values. In the Arab world, we are no longer the good guys—as we were, more or less, up until 1945. Now we are perceived to be just as bad as the old colonialists, Britain and France, and no better than our major competitor, the Soviet Union—just another player in the game of nations. As a result, the author warns, in the future the American public can expect to pay even more dearly for the actions of our government than we have already—a gloomy, but probably accurate prognosis. No wonder the CIA did not want this book to be published.

Despite the agency's efforts, however, Wilbur Eveland got into print. He was too determined and too clever to be stymied by the usual governmental trickery used to circumvent the First Amendment rights of ex-CIA officers who dare to speak out and inform the public of the agency's blunders. No unconstitutional

were going to prevent him from having his say. Nor was he about to be caught up in the crazy quilt of court decisions intended to silence, censor, or financially punish CIA critics for no better reason than to avoid disclosure of the agency's and the government's misdeeds. He has managed to stay one step ahead of the new laws now being passed by stampeding congressmen who think the country is swinging to the right. In the process he discovered a nifty way to challenge the CIA's infamous secrecy agreements, and in so doing he worked a brilliant sting on his former employers—much to their chagrin.

AFTER YEARS OF LARGELY unsuccessful Freedom of Information Act and Privacy Act suits against the agency to recover his personal files, in February of this year Eveland informed the head of the CIA, Admiral Stansfield Turner, that he had written *Ropes of Sand* and that it was then being readied for publication. He also advised the admiral that his publisher had already distributed the galley proofs to the news media and, for that matter, to various commercially interested parties. The CIA was caught off-guard. The agency thought it had closed the door on books appearing without official approval. After all, when Frank Snepp published his *Decent Interval*, based on unclassified materials but unauthorized and highly critical of the agency's debacle in Vietnam, for his pains he was then legally mauled and financially penalized, via a decision by the Burger Court. Immediately thereafter, for good measure, the CIA forced John Stockwell, whose book *In Search of Enemies* exposed the agency's bumbling adventures in Angola, to sign a consent agreement that followed the guidelines implicit in the

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VICTOR MARCHETTI is a former CIA officer. The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence, which he coauthored with John Marks, was the first book ever censored by the CIA prior to publication.